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**Eyal Press' *Beautiful Souls: Saying No, Breaking Ranks, and Heeding the Voice of Conscience in Dark Times***

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In his first book, *Absolute Convictions*, Eyal Press showed how anti-abortion crusaders in Buffalo achieved intense solidarity in pursuit of their goals, including the murder of an abortion provider and intimidation of others, such as the author's father. In *Beautiful Souls*, Press examines another side of strong group conviction: the ability to break ranks with others who display absolute unanimity. He wants to know, "Why, even in situations of seemingly total conformity, there are always some people who refuse to go along?"

*Beautiful Souls* examines four cases: a Swiss police officer who let Jews fleeing Nazism cross into Switzerland in violation of the country's policy; a Serbian who saved the lives of several Croatian townsmen about to be tortured or executed during the Serbo-Croation wars of the 1990s; an Israeli soldier from an elite battalion who joined with others in refusing to serve in the occupied territories; a financial adviser who realized that her company was defrauding investors and blew the whistle. All four took difficult paths of resistance against the conformity around them, and all four were punished for it in different ways. None of them regretted the decision.

Paul Grueninger was in charge of the state police in a small town in northeast Switzerland. The area for which he was responsible shared a border with Austria, and after the Anschluss with Nazi Germany in 1938, many Jews tried sneaking across it. The Swiss authorities worried about the "Jewification" of the nation, and they coordinated with Nazi officials to keep the foreigners out. Grueninger knew the rules, and he may have even accepted the policy at some abstract, general level. But when he encountered the refugees who found their way to his town, he just couldn't send them back. He either forged their papers or gave them special permission to remain in Switzerland. Eventually, the authorities found out, and he was fined and kicked off the force. He lived a quiet life afterward, struggling to make a living, never drawing attention to his situation or his acts of bravery.

Press interviewed the policeman's daughter and unearthed the stories of some of the people he helped. The portrait of Grueninger that emerges is not of a heroic rebel, but of a quiet idealist. "Sometimes ... it is precisely a faithful insider's nonrebelliousness ... that can spark disobedience," Press writes. Grueninger "was not a rebel but a true believer." He believed in the tradition of Switzerland as a haven for those in trouble, and in the values of a free and tolerant people.

And so it is with Press's three other examples of ordinary folks who "broke ranks" with the crowd around them. They did so because they perceived the crowd to be departing from the deeper ideals traditionally voiced in the community. Aleksander Jevtic, the Serb who was told by his armed compatriots to pull fellow Serbs out of a line of people about to be beaten or executed, started calling Croatians by Serbian names so that they could join him in the "safe area." This was in the middle of a war zone, and if he had been found out, the reprisal undoubtedly would have been brutal. Why did he risk it? Jevtic was no philosopher, Press stresses; he just always believed in the traditional Yugoslav slogan "brotherhood and unity." His girlfriend was Croatian, and the couple's capacity for empathy wasn't limited by ethnicity.

When Avner Wishnitzer refused to serve in the occupied territories, he, too, was motivated by his belief in traditional ideals. He knew that his decision would brand him as a pariah. But Wishnitzer hoped to remind people of the democratic and egalitarian dimensions of Israel's roots. He cared less for his "beautiful soul" than for the destiny of his nation. He wanted his refusal to make a difference, and not just for him.

When Leyla Wydler reported the massive financial irregularities at Stanford Financial, she believed she was upholding the ethical standards of her profession. Like many other whistleblowers, she didn't realize how corrupt the whole enterprise had become -- from regulators to professional practitioners to government officials, almost everyone thought it expedient to look the other way because they, too, profited from corruption. Wydler, a single parent with limited resources, was put under enormous pressure to keep her mouth shut. But she had a basic trust in the ethics she had been taught, and she felt that "my actions, my intentions, have to have a sort of meaning in this life."

Press also spent time talking to people who broke ranks in the name of values he found less congenial -- such as racism and segregation. The fact that you buck the tide, he knows, doesn't mean your goals are valid. Press offers a brief, vague argument to suggest that good goals are ones that stretch the "moral imagination." Racism and corruption, though, are not just failures of imagination; they are particular uses of our imaginative capacities that some of us reject for moral and political reasons.

*Beautiful Souls*, however, does not make philosophical arguments. Instead, it provides rich, provocative narratives of moral choice. Of course, there are enormous differences between saving lives in a war zone and exposing corruption in a financial services firm. But Press shows that in these various contexts, people break ranks with those around them because they share a deeper allegiance to social values that go beyond the immediate situation. Their ability to say "no" comes from their histories of saying "yes," of committing themselves to social ideals worth fighting for. Cynicism and ironic distance play no role in these quiet heroes' decisions to swim against the tide.

In exploring their courage, Press makes us wonder if we would have the strength to act against the crowd, and in so doing spread a bit of light in our own dark times.

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